Chapter 2

Plan Development Process

Organizational Structure

The Nebraska Natural Legacy Project is designed to be a blueprint for biological diversity conservation in Nebraska. To be comprehensive, its development required the input of a wide variety of agencies, organizations and individuals. Implementing a blueprint of this magnitude cannot be accomplished by one agency – it must be a collaborative effort of many entities and individuals. For its implementation to be successful there must be broad participation in developing the blueprint. To facilitate this collaboration and accomplish the many tasks required to develop the plan, eight teams were established. Six of the eight teams included members from outside of the Game and Parks Commission. See Appendix 1 for a list of the members of each team.

Partnership Team

Audubon Nebraska
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
Farmers Union
Nebraska Alliance for Conservation and Environment Education
Nebraska Association of Resources Districts
Nebraska Bird Partnership
Nebraska Cattlemen
Nebraska Corn Board
Nebraska Corn Growers Association
Nebraska Department of Agriculture
Nebraska Farm Bureau
Nebraska Forest Service
Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
Nebraska Land Trust
Nebraska Soybean Association
Nebraska Wildlife Federation
Nebraska Wildlife Society
Pheasants Forever, Inc.
Ponca Tribe of Nebraska
Rainwater Basin Joint Venture of Nebraska
Sandhills Task Force
The Nature Conservancy
U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Forest Service

Partnership Team
The partnership team is composed of twenty-five representatives from federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska (see box). Its roles included developing guiding principles for plan development, ensuring the plan was effective and useful to a variety of entities, developing and participating in a public participation process, reviewing initial drafts of the plan, and providing guidance during plan implementation. The partnership team represents many of the entities and individuals that have been involved in implementing this blueprint.

Science Team
This team was composed of science staff from the NGPC Wildlife and Fisheries Divisions, faculty from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Natural Resources, and representatives from non-governmental organizations in the state. The team was charged with developing the scientific approach of the plan (see Chapter 3), identifying at-risk species and biologically unique landscapes, identifying future research needs, and conducting species expert workshops to gather information on at-risk species.

Wildlife Education Team
This team was composed of naturalists, formal educators, Project WILD, Project WET and Learning Tree Coordinators and administration staff from the Nebraska Department of Education. The role of this team was to identify the needs for both formal and non-formal conservation and environmental education and develop statewide strategies to address these needs.

Core Team
This team was composed of Commission staff including the two co-chairs of this planning effort, a planning assistant/biologist, a GIS specialist, and support staff. The primary role of this team was to coordinate and support the efforts of the other teams, oversee public and professional input, and oversee development of the final document.

Public Involvement

The Partnership Team assumed an active role and ownership in the public input process. The Partnership Team met in advance of the Natural Legacy public meetings for planning purposes. At this meeting, participants were asked to determine how best to reach out to the public and gather input on the stresses affecting species and habitats and the conservation actions needed to address those stresses. This group developed a process that included public input meetings in each of the four ecoregions (Tallgrass Prairie, Mixedgrass Prairie, Shortgrass Prairie and Sandhills). Partnership Team members volunteered to co-sponsor and co-facilitate public input meetings. To ensure good attendance at the meetings, Partnership Team members utilized their organizations' outreach capabilities to encourage their members to attend.

The series of public input meetings were held across Nebraska to address concerns, include ideas from communities, and promote Natural Legacy. Public input meetings were held during the spring and summer of 2010. These meetings occurred in 10 cities (Beatrice – April 28, Lincoln – May 17, Kearney – May 20, Omaha – May 26, North

Platte – May 27, Norfolk – June 2, Scottsbluff – June 15, Chadron – June 16, Valentine – June 22, and Thedford – July 8). Facilitation techniques were customized to individual group size. The method proved to be highly successful in gathering relevant public input. To be used, comments and suggestions had to adhere to guiding principles developed by the Partnership Team. Input was categorized and similar comments were grouped into summary statements that were then incorporated into the revised draft plan that was made available online for public commentary. In each of the public input meetings, participants were asked to answer the following questions:

Questions asked at Public Input Meetings in 2010

1) What additional stresses to wildlife in your area need to be addressed?
2) What additional actions within biologically unique landscapes (BULs) can lead to improvements for wildlife and habitat?
3) What is needed to increase collaboration between private landowners, agencies, and organizations interested in wildlife conservation?
4) What are the impediments to active conservation in these BULs?
5) What local environmental education and outreach needs exist in your community?
6) What would encourage people to get involved locally to implement Natural Legacy's objectives?

Conservation Practitioner Involvement

The purpose of the conservation practitioner workshops was to gather input on stresses, conservation actions, barriers to conservation, and research and inventory needs. Eight conservation practitioner workshops were held in the spring and summer of 2010 in Lincoln – May 17, Kearney – May 20, North Platte – May 27, Norfolk – June 2, Scottsbluff – June 15, and Chadron – June 16, Valentine – June 22, and Thedford – July 9. Natural resource and agricultural professionals discussed concerns and strategies regarding the state wildlife action plan. Participants included individuals from local, state and federal natural resource agencies, private conservation organizations, and universities. This input was categorized and used to identify stresses to species and habitats, develop conservation actions (in conjunction with the aforementioned public input), and identify research and inventory needs. The stresses and conservation actions listed in the statewide chapter, in the ecoergion chapters and each Biologically Unique Landscape description represent the compilation of input from all the mentioned sources. They were filtered by the guiding principles developed by the Natural Legacy Partnership Team, but every effort was made to represent the information gathered. They represent the best available information at this time, and do not necessarily apply to each parcel of land. A small group facilitator and recorder gathered input to update the Natural Legacy Projects based on the following questions:

Questions asked at Conservation Practitioner Workshops in 2010

1) What additional threats to wildlife habitat in your area need to be addressed? What additional conservation actions should be considered?
2) What information gaps exist and what are the research questions to explore?
3) What is needed to advance conservation efforts in the biologically unique landscapes?
4) Are there "information products" we should be developing to enhance conservation effectiveness and landscape/BUL planning (i.e., what tools do you need to be more effective)? What opportunities exist for sharing this information?
5) Assuming a 5-10° increase in temperature in the next 50 years and changes in precipitation, how can we assist wildlife populations as they try to adapt to altered conditions?
6) For those BULs that adjoin the NE border, what approaches would be helpful in extending conservation efforts beyond state boundaries?
7) What biodiversity "hotspots" in these BULs provide wildlife viewing/educational opportunities?

Additional Input

A series of one-day workshops were conducted with experts on birds, fishes, mammals, insects, mollusks, reptiles/amphibians, and plants in Nebraska. The goals of the workshops were to review and revise the Natural Legacy Project list of at-risk species, assess the vulnerability of Tier I species to climate change, and gather information on at-risk species including habitat requirements, stresses, research and inventory needs, and locations of populations that are not already in the Natural Heritage database. A wealth of information was gathered, much of which is included in Appendix 8. Information on locations of at-risk species was used to help select the biologically unique landscapes (see Chapter 3). The meeting groups also discussed new, species-specific threats, research and inventory needs, and conservation actions.

Involving Partners in Plan Implementation

The task of conserving Nebraska's biological diversity is far larger than one organization can accomplish on its own. For this reason, the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project was designed from the beginning to be a statewide blueprint for many to use. We involved a wide variety of agencies, organizations and individuals in developing the Natural Legacy plan. Throughout this document, we stress the importance of involving these partners in its implementation. In the ecoregion chapters we identify some existing conservation partnerships and in Chapter 4 list specific conservation actions to encourage the development of new and support existing partnerships that can facilitate the conservation of biological diversity.

The Natural Legacy Partnership Team will remain engaged in involving partners in implementation across the state. The Natural Legacy Partnership Team's previous tasks included approving which Biologically Unique Landscapes would be the "flagships" to begin implementation. After Flagship Biologically Unique Landscapes were established, the team's role has expanded to fund allocation through a granting process for innovative projects. This has been successful in securing new partners and beginning work in new areas of the state. This team's involvement will continue to evolve as implementation continues to evolve.

At the project level, local conservation practitioners have established a collaborative precedent; projects are typically accomplished using a variety of partners. Private landowners are a fundamental partner, but projects typically include other state and federal partners. This has allowed local practitioners to efficiently accomplish habitat improvement by engaging partners with mutual interest in projects. This locally driven approach will continue.

Natural Legacy partners are also involved in state wildlife action plan implementation through their participation in an external competitive grants program. Since the inception of federal wildlife diversity funding in 2001, a significant portion of Nebraska's Wildlife Conservation and Restoration Program and State Wildlife Grants funding has been made available to partners through a competitive grants program. These grants have resulted in on-the-ground conservation projects/initiatives, added to our knowledge of the state's biological diversity, and built capacity to improve delivery of conservation. Criteria used to evaluate these grants correspond directly to actions identified in the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project.

Plan to Review and Revise

A living and working document requires periodic review and revision. Within every 10 years, an extensive formal revision of the plan will be conducted. The Partnership Team will be asked to help evaluate accomplishments and assess if goals, actions and strategies need to be adjusted. The formal revision is similar to the initial process in that a team of partner agencies and organizations guides the process and seeks significant participation from conservation practitioners and the public. During that process, we gather information regarding success of implementation of conservation actions, outreach and education efforts, and accomplishment of priority goals. An adaptive management approach is used to adjust strategies and actions based on lessons learned. Natural Legacy Project revision is an open process; during each iteration, invitations will be extended to additional stakeholders to increase involvement.

In order to help evaluate progress, a database has been developed to track plan implementation. Information tracked includes conservation goals, types of conservation actions implemented, agencies, organizations or individuals involved in the implementation, species and habitats affected, number of acres or miles of stream affected, location, project cost, and funding sources.

Information on at-risk species, habitats, and biologically unique landscapes is maintained in the Commission's Natural Heritage database. This is updated as new information becomes available through inventory and research projects. The biologically unique landscapes database is linked to the species and habitat database and will automatically be updated with new information, which will facilitate revisions to the landscape boundaries and evaluation of goals.

The Tier I and Tier II at-risk species lists will be periodically reviewed and revised by taxon experts. This revision will occur on an ongoing basis as new information on abundance, distribution, and population trends becomes available, with an overall review every five to ten years. The most recent reviews occurred autumn 2010.

We identified Biologically Unique Landscapes (BULs - see Chapter 3) as areas of the state with the greatest potential for at-risk species and natural community conservation. Additional planning at BUL or regional scales will identify priorities and goals for these geographic areas. This process will involve others who are responsible for conservation work within the BUL or who may be affected by the planning outcome. This process would ensure that implementation of conservation actions in each Biologically Unique Landscape focuses on what is additive to the network of conservation lands and necessary for at-risk species sustainability.

Original State Wildlife Action Plan Development (2004-05):

The original Nebraska Natural Legacy Project Partnership Team is listed in Appendix 1. In addition to the Partnership, Science, Wildlife Education/Recreation, and Core teams, the following teams contributed to the first edition of the state wildlife action plan:

Internal Support Team
This team was composed of the Game and Parks Commission's (NGPC) upper level administrative staff and two commissioners from the agency's Board of Commissioners. This team's responsibility was to provide policy oversight, ensure that the blueprint met the required elements, and provide guidance for the Commission's conservation efforts.

Outreach Team
This team included staff from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Audubon Nebraska, Nebraska Environmental Trust, The University of Nebraska-Lincoln and four Divisions within the Game and Parks Commission. The team assisted with planning for public input meetings and provided guidance regarding multiple methods of reaching the public.

Conservation Actions "Team"
This "team" included over 400 individuals who provided input at public input meetings, a conservation practitioner workshop, expert meetings and other forums to identify stresses affecting species and habitats and conservation actions to address those stresses. Input provided by team members was used to draft the statewide and ecoregional chapters.

Ecoregional Writing Teams
These four teams were composed of members from each of the four respective ecoregions. Team members consisted of a private landowner, Partnership Team member, public lands manager, private lands biologist, and a member of private conservation organization. Their role was to help draft the chapters on each ecoregion.

Public Involvement
Sixteen public input meetings were held during the fall of 2004. Over 350 citizens participated in the meetings and averages of over 100 comments were recorded at each meeting. Participants were asked to answer the following questions:

Questions asked at Public Input Meetings in 2004

1. What stresses are changing wildlife habitat in your area?
2. What conservation actions could positively impact Nebraska's species and their habitats?
3. What is needed to increase collaboration between private landowners, agencies and organizations interested in wildlife conservation?
4. What could be included in a blueprint that would call Nebraskans to action?
5. What should be measured as an indicator to determine if Nebraska's conservation plan is working?

Conservation Practitioner Involvement
Nearly 100 conservation practitioners attended a 2-day professionally facilitated workshop in Kearney, NE on October, 2004 to discuss issues pertinent to the state's biological diversity. A small group facilitator and recorder gathered input based on the following questions.

Questions asked at Conservation Practitioner Workshops in 2004

1. What are the stresses to aquatic species and habitats in your ecoregion?
2. What are the stresses to terrestrial species and habitats in your ecoregion?
3. What should be measured as an indicator to determine if conservation actions are successful?
4. What are the barriers to conservation in your ecoregion?
5. What private land incentives are needed to conserve the state's biological diversity?
6. What land management activities are needed to conserve the state's biological diversity?
7. What land protection options are needed to conserve the state's biological diversity?
8. What research and inventory is needed to conserve the state's biological diversity?
9. What educational strategies are needed to conserve the state's biological diversity?
10. What policy/legislation is needed to conserve the state's biological diversity?
11. What capacity issues are barriers to implementation of conservation actions?

In 2004, a series of one-day workshops was conducted with Commission field staff in each of the Commission's Districts. The primary goal of the workshops was to identify and gather information on sites in each District that contain terrestrial and aquatic habitats in good condition. Additional information collected included habitat types and relative condition of habitat, current land use, and stresses that could change habitats in the area. This information was used to help select biologically unique landscapes and identify stresses in those landscapes. To gain additional knowledge about the distribution and abundance of at-risk species and ecological communities, field inventory work was conducted during the 2003 and 2004 field seasons. The Science Team prioritized survey work by selecting for inventory those species and communities that were most at-risk and for which we had the least amount of data. Inventories were conducted for selected small mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, fishes, and ecological communities. Inventory work was conducted by qualified biologists, under contract to the Commission. All inventory data were entered into the Natural Heritage database and used in the analyses. Taxonomic experts contributed additional information that was beneficial in developing the State Wildlife Action Plan.